

The Old Regular Family Memorial: Kinsmanship, Appalachia, and a Sense of Place

Howard Dorgan

That's one way we have of keeping our dead alive. We don't forget them, you know.

— Elder Raymond Smith in
“While the Ages Roll On” 1990

Memorialization of the dead is important within Old Regular Baptist tradition. “Passed over yonder” loved ones are rarely forgotten. Memories of a deceased “Mom,” “Dad,” “Grandpa,” “Grandma,” older brother or sister, other relative, endeared friend, or respected leader are kept alive by the visiting of graves, by the annual calling out of names, by the ritualistic reading of obituaries, and occasionally by the formal passing forward of bits of oral history: “Grandmother Caudill was a black-bonneted believer who loved to shout and praise, and who for forty-five years kept her stand seat in Little Jocie Church, with thirty of those years spent as the deaconess who baked our communion bread.” “Papa O’Quinn helped everybody he could, specially members of the church. Seemed like he was always helping someone get an old pickup running or getting some firewood or coal for a shut-in.”

I have already discussed four major ways in which Old Regulars memorialize deceased loved one: obituaries published in association minutes, grave-side memorials, within-the-church memorials, and family

memorials (Dorgan 1987, 152-57, 185-213; Dorgan 1989, 77-102). In this paper I return to the last of these practices and focus on these occasions as expressions of respect for the family matriarch and patriarch, as celebrations of family unity and love, and as displays of that strong sense of place pervading much of Appalachian life. The Smith Family Memorial, held each August in the small community of Canada, Pike County, Kentucky, serves as the model for my discussion. Furthermore, Kevin Balling's video, "While the Ages Roll On . . . A Memorial," serves as a documentation of all factors here examined.

The Smith Family Memorial

Second Saturday and Sunday [in August] will be a memorial of the Raymond Smith family. His first wife, Clustena, father Tom, mother Gracie, brothers Virgil, Cullin, Edgar, Verlin, and Evirit Smith. Sister Maudie's family, her first husband Ersel Williamson, father and mother Emzy and Louisia Robinette, brother Estil Robinette, sister Gracie Frances and brother-in-law Caudil Francis. . . . Ministers requested to attend are, Elders, Arnold Clevenger, Lacie Walters, Clifford Stanley, Tommy Kidd, Edd Kidd, Virgil Hess, David Hicks, Billie Cochran, and Thermond Akers. (Union Association *Minutes* 1989, 15)

During the second weekend in August, well over a hundred family members and friends gather at the home of Raymond and Maudie Smith, beside Straton Fork of Meathouse Creek, tributaries of the Tug River. Both Brother Raymond and Sister Maudie have large families from previous marriages. In each case the original spouse died, thus meeting the most basic Old Regular prerequisite to second marriages: in most associations, re-marriage after divorce is not allowed for a church elder, and is permissible for ordinary church members only for the wronged party in divorces caused by adultery (Sardis Association *Minutes* 1964, 6).

Because of this convergence of two families, the Smith Family Memorial is actually a celebration of two lineages, the Smiths and the Williamsons. This provides potential for the large family gatherings, augmented as they always are by members of the Lonesome Dove Old Regular Baptist Church (the fellowship that Elder Raymond Smith moderates) and by friends from the Straton Fork community. I have attended four of these annual events (1986, 1987, 1989, and 1990) and have witnessed two-day turn-outs that range from a low of around one hundred to a high of approximately two hundred.

The celebration officially begins on Saturday morning with the

regular monthly business meeting and worship service at Lonesome Dove Church. This is followed by the noon meal at the Smith home, by informal visits with family and friends during the afternoon, and by a singing and preaching service in the home that evening. The next day (Sunday) is devoted to the actual memorial service, held on the side lawn of Raymond and Maudie's house, followed by a dinner-on-the-ground and possibly by an afternoon singing, the latter becoming an unplanned happening.

Preparations for these events begin early in the week, particularly for women, who cook hundreds of dishes to be consumed during the two-day affair: pies, cakes, casseroles, meats, breads, and other storable foods. Some Lonesome Dove women contribute to this supply of eatables, but most of the food is prepared by females in the immediate family.

With help from other male family members, Brother Raymond tidies the exterior of the home — the usual yard work and perhaps some fresh painting. Eventually folding chairs are brought from the church to accommodate worshipers during the Sunday service, and a large grave-site awning is secured from a local funeral home. Long tables are placed underneath this awning to provide space for the cornucopian spread of food needed for the dinner-on-the-ground.

Numerous moved-away family members return to the old homestead for these events, and Sister Maudie stands ready to bed and board all who arrive. Accompanied by assisting daughters and daughters-in-law, Maudie Smith seldom emerges from her kitchen except to make beds and perform other housekeeping chores. In general, a gender separation prevails throughout the weekend, with men assembled in clusters on the front or side lawns and women gathered in the kitchen or living room: men smoke, chew, whittle, and talk; while women cook, clean, care-for, and talk.

The formal memorialization is accomplished through a reading of deceased family member's names at the beginning of Sunday's morning service. Lonesome Dove's longer inside-the-church memorial service honors every deceased church member by a reading of her or his name, but the Smith Family Memorial focuses only on three generations of the immediate family, the father and mother of Raymond and Maudie, all "passed away" brothers and sisters, and all children. When Elder Smith was asked about these restrictions, he argued that to do otherwise became too "confusing." Were the Smiths to add just aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, the list would be unwieldy. "They're in our thoughts at this time," Smith added, "even if we don't call the name" (Raymond Smith interview 1989).

Community Respect for the Family Matriarch and Patriarch

I have brothers and sisters. But I have friends and loved one, you might say, that are just people of the world, who don't profess religion, that come from miles and miles to this memorial meeting. (Elder Raymond Smith in "While the Ages Roll On" 1990)

Although this event memorializes deceased family members, much of the informal meaning of the weekend is found in a community's desire to honor the reigning matriarch and patriarch of this family. "I come to this little memorial because I was called to be here and preach," remarked Elder Clifford Stanley, "but I mainly come to pay respect to Brother Raymond and Sister Maudie. This is their day" (Clifford Stanley interview 1989).

Elder Stanley's sentiment mirrors motivations of many non-family participants in this annual gathering. There is much about this event — in substance and in spirit — that may be read as a judgment of Brother Raymond and Sister Maudie. Is the affair well attended? Is the tone genuinely hospitable? Does the event show a family that is unified and happy? Do we see many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, signaling the ongoingness of this familial unit? Are there worthy values undergirding the structure of this unit? And do we see evidence of a paternity/maternity steeped in role-modeling responsibility? "A family is individuals," said Brother Arnold Clevenger. "But it still ain't a real family unless you got someone holding it together. Brother Raymond and Sister Maudie do real well at that" (Arnold Clevenger interview 1989).

During the August, 1989, Smith Family Memorial, when footage was shot for "While the Ages Roll on . . . A Memorial," attendance seemed down from the year before by approximately one-third. Darvin Marshall, a friend of the Smith family and my long-time contact with Old Regulars, speculated that the cameras, microphones, and lights kept some regular attendees away, sensitive as Old Regular Baptists have become to outsider-directed film or video projects. I thought I saw some sadness in Brother Raymond Smith as a result of this drop in attendance, but such an emotion was never verbalized. Elder Smith had wanted one of the memorials to be recorded in this fashion and seemed willing to accept a one-year reduction in attendance were that to be the price to be paid. When I visited the Smith family for their 1990 memorial, the gathering appeared to be as large as it had been in the past.

Family Love and Unity

I remember hard work . . . but I remember the simple pleasures, too, from being a part of a family that knew each other, that cared about each other, loved each other, because they were taught that was the way it was supposed to be. (Bud Smith in “While the Ages Roll On” 1990)

This two-day event is called a memorial, but it is also a family reunion. A celebration of kinsmanship runs through all the cooking, eating, worshipping, and socializing, annually strengthening the “ties that bind” these individuals not only to a faith but also to a common parentage (Smith or Williamson), to a history of common struggle, and to a commonly shared sense of familial loyalty. “This is about me and mine, and I wouldn’t miss it,” says Freida Stanley of Columbia, Kentucky, Raymond’s oldest daughter. “I’ve got to be here each year just to know there’s something solid, something the world won’t sweep away in all the little and big changes going on. I like my roots” (Freida Stanley interview 1989).

These gathering also are about nurturing and growth, about children and the everwidening branches of a family tree. “Around here your children are your most important asset,” declares Bud Smith.

I mean what you make of them is what you leave in this world. When all is said and done, you may own a fine home or something while you’re here. But it’s only yours while you’re here. When you leave it’s somebody else’s. That child remains yours. And his children remain your grandchildren. They’re your legacy — what you leave. That’s the only thing that will be left of you when you’re gone. (Bud Smith in “While the Ages Roll On” 1990)

In “While the Ages Roll On” we hear an interesting mixture of rhetoric dealing with immortality. In one instance there is Bud Smith’s legacy-in-children rationale, reinforced by a scene in Maudie’s kitchen when she talks of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. At other times there are scenes in which Raymond and Maudie speak of their faith in a spiritual afterlife. This Smith Family Memorial serves both rationales, one supported by names being read to individuals who have become “legacies,” the other fostered by constant references to the “passed over yonder” status of these former family members. The latter may be considered more critical than the former, but still there must be great satisfaction in knowing that as long as this tradition lives there is

a guarantee that you (a family member) eventually will be included in such a list. Surely remembrance of forebears exists as one of the most obligatory of family responsibilities.

Sense of Place and the Smith Family Memorial

All my life I've been a wanderer. I'd drift from here to there, but I'd always come home. And especially in the springtime. I tend to think of the spring as a time of new birth, you know. And when the trees start to budding I have to come home. . . . This is home, and I want to live here and die here. It's as simple as that. There's no place like it. (Bud Smith in "While the Ages Roll On" 1990)

I have written elsewhere about Old Regular traditions and the Appalachian sense of place (Dorgan 1988, 138-52). Here I will simply observe that family memorials constitute only one of several Old Regular practices fostering a tie to home and region. A list of the other practices would include, in particular, "Association Time" and "Union Meetings." Nevertheless, the drawing power of family memorials is especially strong, combining the magnetisms of religion, kinsmanship, home, and region.

As mentioned earlier, Old Regular family memorials are also family reunions, providing, as they do, opportunity for moved-away loved ones to return to the physical, social, and psychological environments of their growing-up years. These occasions foster reunion, of course, but they also provide time and place for a multitude of family interactions: disappointments are shared and triumphs are celebrated; the weak and frustrated are comforted, while the strong and successful are allowed their moments of compensatory humility; the riches of parenthood are displayed — infants and children prepared for inspection, and the dignities of age are honored; but, perhaps as much as anything else, the hallowedness of place is recognized — home, spot of ground, arboreal environment, community, roads, streams, hollows, and mountains. In "While the Ages Roll On," when Bud Smith speaks eloquently of "home," he glances all around the Straton Fork scene, taking in the full range of images, past and present. With his eyes he embraces "place"; with his voice he expresses longing to remain. The concept of family is important, but family is cradled in physical space that assumes its own special sacredness. Bud Smith's eyes perform the rituals that sanctify that "place."

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